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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS  
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INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000789

SIPDIS

NEA/MAG (NARDI/STEWART)  
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/16/2018  
TAGS: PREL PHUM EU TS  
SUBJECT: MIXED TUNISIAN REACTION TO SARKOZY'S "CLUB MED"  
LAUNCH

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Even while Tunisia harbors aspirations to host the headquarters of the Sarkozy-backed Union for the Mediterranean (UPM), the domestic reaction to the July 13 launch of this new entity has been mixed. From the beginning, the GOT has been supportive of the initiative, but among the business community there is a high degree of skepticism about the effectiveness of such an organization, coupled with uncertainty about Tunisia's billing within the UPM. Meanwhile, opposition and human rights activists have complained that Sarkozy's efforts to launch the UPM caused France to downplay Tunisia's domestic human rights situation.

End Summary.

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You've Got a Friend In Me  
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¶2. (C) The GOT continues to be supportive of the Union for the Mediterranean (UPM), and is reportedly hoping that Tunisia will be chosen to host the headquarters of the new organization. The UPM was a major point of discussion during Sarkozy's April 28-30 visit to Tunisia, during which French Special Advisor to the Presidency Henri Guaino opined Tunisia had been, "heavily committed in support of France since the launch of this initiative." President Ben Ali, who rarely travels internationally attended the July 13 founding summit of the UPM in Paris, albeit only for a few hours. The GOT's interest is likely motivated by the idea that membership would promote Tunisia's international standing. Tunisia has a solid track record on economic development and would like to project leadership on environmental issues, two major issues for the UPM. Thus far it does not seem the UPM will concentrate on good governance, an area in which the GOT has been criticized.

¶3. (C) There were rumors in Tunisia that President Ben Ali, who was the first president of an Arab nation to publicly support the UPM, had hoped he would be rewarded with the first UPM co-presidency. Since that position has gone to Egyptian President Mubarak (who will be co-president with Sarkozy for the UPM's first term), the next best thing for Tunisia would be to be home to the new organization's headquarters. The GOT has shown no signs that it will withdraw its candidacy for the UPM headquarters, but neither has it officially declared its intentions. Tunisia had pinned its hopes on the fact that French Prime Minister Francois Fillon has proposed the UPM headquarters should be situated in one of the southern Mediterranean countries. The issue of Tunis as possible headquarters may also have been discussed during Sarkozy's state visit here.

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Proof is in the Pudding  
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¶4. (C) Tunisia's business community is skeptical that the UPM will prove effective in coordinating environmental, trade, and immigration policies, given the multitude of similar initiatives under the Barcelona Process and the Arab Maghreb Union which have not been particularly productive. Now that Sarkozy's initial proposal has grown to include 44 countries, press commentaries have tended to doubt whether such an economically and socially disparate group of countries can reach a meaningful consensus. They also wonder about the benefits to Tunisia, as a major focus of the UPM promises to be a free trade agreement from which Tunisia has little to gain, given that it already has a free trade agreement with the EU.

¶5. (C) Like the business community, opposition and human rights activists have voiced skepticism about the UPM. In a conversation with A/DCM, Abdelmajid Charfi, an independent social historian, characterized the initiative as meaningless. Mustapha Ben Jaafar, leader of the independent opposition party Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedom (FDTL) was equally dismissive, calling the diplomatic confab an "empty shell." Civil society activists have also pointed out that good governance is not a focus of the UPM; thus, they feel the organization would do little to advance freedom of association or freedom of expression domestically. Several Tunisian activists opined that Sarkozy's eagerness to launch the UPM caused him to downplay the domestic human rights situation. During his April 28-30 visit to Tunisia,

after which he concluded bilateral agreements concerning civil nuclear energy, immigration cooperation, and finalized the sale of 16 Airbus planes to state-owned Tunisair, Sarkozy's praise of Tunisian "progress" on liberties drew widespread criticism in opposition circles. Khemmais Chemmari, a prominent human rights activist who lived in self-imposed exile in France for several years, boycotted the French Embassy's Bastille Day reception this year in protest.

¶6. (C) Despite many misgivings about the UPM, some commentators have voiced cautious optimism about certain elements. Journalist Taieb Zahar argued, "We must welcome the rediscovered role of France and Europe for its implication in the resolution of regional conflicts, notably the Israeli-Palestinian (conflict)." Ambassador Ahmed Ounaias, a prominent intellectual, opined, "The bilateral partnership has reached its limits...the initiative is about the necessity of a central Mediterranean institution which takes its specificity and develops with the European Union along organic lines."

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Comment  
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¶7. (C) Should Tunisia win the UPM headquarters, which is far from certain, its international credibility would get an immediate boost. Over the longer term, the potential benefits to Tunisia will depend on the Union's actual deliverables. Having seen the AMU and Barcelona process launched with much fanfare and little follow-through, many Tunisian commentators are understandably skeptical. End Comment.  
GODEC